

**MASSOUD AZARNOUSH**  
**(1945-2008)**

BY

Ali MOUSAVI  
(Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

It is with a profound regret that we record the sudden death of Massoud Azarnoush of an unexpected heart attack on 27 November 2008 at the age of 63. It is equally unfortunate to remember that during the first decade of this century a number of distinguished personalities of Iranian archaeology surprisingly passed away: Muhammad Mehryar (1939-2004), a talented architect of distinction whose contributions to the preservation of various historical sites and monuments, including his work at Tepe Hegmataneh and also at Bam are always remembered; Ali Shapur Shahbazi (1942-2006), one of the foremost authorities of ancient Iranian civilization; Cuyler Young (1934-2007), the excavator of Godin Tepe, and one of the most brilliant archaeologists ever to work in Iran; Parviz Varjavand (1934-2007), archaeologist and professor at the University of Tehran, and a courageous activist of cultural heritage affairs; Baqer Ayatollahzadeh Shirazi (1936-2007), a veteran master of architecture and restoration of historical buildings, long-time director of the National Office for Restoration of Historical Monuments, and one of the founders of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization; and finally Ezatollah Negahban (1921-2009), professor at the University of Tehran, the father of modern Iranian archaeology and the founder of the Archaeological Institute of the University of Tehran. The loss is certainly irredeemable. It was in such a situation that the sudden death of Massoud Azarnoush shocked the community of archaeologists working on Iran. As we move through life, the force of fate creates events that we only appreciate in retrospect; it is how it happened to Massoud Azarnoush who sealed his fate with the choices that he made.

Massoud Azarnoush was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1945 in Kermanshah in the proximity of great monuments such as the celebrated Taq-e Bustan and the rock of Bisutun, which must have had an immediate close effect on him in his youth. His early years passed in Kermanshah. Later, he

moved to Tehran to study archaeology in the department of Art and Archaeology at the University of Tehran, from where he obtained his MA in 1974. During his graduate years, Azarnoush participated in a number of important archaeological excavations at Haft Tepe (1968), Kangavar (1972-73) and Masjed-e Suleiman (1974). His talent in mastering archaeological field methods was soon noticed by his teachers. The 1970s was an important period of development for the archaeology of Iran under the auspices of the recently founded Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research (ICAR) under the direction of Firouz Bagherzadeh. In 1976, Azarnoush was selected to participate in the excavations at Susa, which had been recently turned into an international dig. He took part in the excavation of the Palace of Artaxerxes on the Shaur. In the same year, he conducted a limited excavation at the Hellenistic site of Shir-e Sangi in Hamadan. During the summer of 1977 a mound situated in the vicinity of the village of Hajiabad, in southern Fars, was bulldozed for agricultural reasons which led to the discovery of numerous high-quality stucco works. This prompted the ICAR to organize the excavation of the site under the direction of Masoud Azarnoush. Hajiabad proved to be an extremely rich site, the excavation of which shortly revealed a number of well preserved figural stuccos of ladies in niches and royal busts. The figural stuccos were interpreted as mainly belonging to the cult of Anahita; the busts attributed to Shapur II (r. 309-79 A.D.) and to Bahram Kushanshah led the excavator to believe that the building was decorated sometime around A.D. 359. In 1979, Azarnoush left Iran to pursue his doctoral studies and obtained his doctorate in 1987 from the University of California, Los Angeles, by presenting a thesis based on the results of his excavation at Hajiabad (*Sassanian art in Eastern Fars: the Excavation of a Manor House at Hajiabad, Darab, Iran*), which he published later in the form of a book (*The Sasanian Manor House at Hajiabad, Iran*, Florence, 1994).

In spite of the tumultuous years of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, archaeological research in Iran never completely halted. A few Iranian teams took up the task of excavating and preserving archaeological sites and monuments during the difficult years of war. In 1987, the ICAR was incorporated in the Research Department of the newly created Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran. Later, following the end of the eight-year war, the number of archaeological activities in Iran increased, and the 1990s witnessed a considerable reinvigoration of archaeological research in the country.

In 1995, Azarnoush returned to Iran to take up a teaching position at the University of Tehran. In 2000, he was invited by Muhammad Beheshti, the then director of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, to join the Research Department of the Organization. With his charisma and determination he was finally able to re-organize the research administration by re-establishing the ICAR, which had been dissolved at the time of the creation of the Organization. His six-year tenure as the Head of the ICAR witnessed remarkable progress and development in different fields of archaeological research in Iran. In line with his tremendous amount of work at the ICAR, he continued to support and train students; some of those emerged as young archaeologists who are now active in different parts of the country.

With an expanding economy and a considerable growth of population serious threats have been imposed on archaeological sites. This required a series of rescue operations. One of Azarnoush's concerns was to push for the creation of well-planned research projects in the form of National Projects, in which all the relevant parties — the ICAR and developers — were involved. In 2004, the number of these projects amounted to 60. Iran is a vast country with a great number of archaeological sites. Azarnoush was well aware that the country's body of archaeologists might not be adequate to challenge the growing demands of a rapidly evolving economy and industrial expansion. It is why he welcomed constructive cooperation with international teams of archaeologists. When in 2003, the construction of the Sivand dam in the region of Pasargadae, in Fars, raised international concern regarding damage to archaeological sites in the area, Azarnoush urged the community of archaeologists to join efforts under the ICAR to carry out rescue excavations in the area that was planned to be flooded. This international call was well received, and a number of archaeological teams from Germany, France, Italy and Poland participated in what became the Sivand Dam Archaeological Project. The archaeological work postponed the construction schedule of the dam for four consecutive years. The success of this international enterprise led to the exploration of the entire valley, and resulted in the discovery of important sites in the vicinity of Pasargadae. Moreover, some of the joint expeditions, the work of which had been interrupted in 1979, were able to resume their fieldwork in order to complete their publication of the final results. The ICAR also organized a number of archaeological symposia at a national level in different parts of the country. His wide ranging interests

were also displayed by his enthusiastic support of research on the prehistory of Iran and of the excavation of major sites of the Islamic period such as Nishapur and Siraf.

Azarnoush was always interested in the puzzle of Tepe Hegmataneh, in Hamadan. The mound had been excavated for a decade without satisfactory results. It is why in 2005, he decided to launch a series of fresh excavations in order to establish a reliable stratigraphy for the site. He was assisted by the Italian archaeologist Raffaello Biscione and by a number of qualified Iranian colleagues. In the course of three seasons of work, soundings in different sectors of the mound failed to yield any evidence prior to the Parthian period (see [www.hegmataneh.com](http://www.hegmataneh.com)). According to the new excavation results, the site of Median Ekbatana is now to be sought elsewhere. It was just after his return from his dig at Hamadan that he succumbed to a heart stroke which deprived the whole community of archaeologists from a man who had still a lot to offer.

Massoud had a complex personality. I remember that we were both on the same flight to Shiraz in the spring of 1999. He was still at the university, and was on a trip to Bishapur while I was going to Pasargadae. I attempted on several occasions to open a conversation; it never got beyond a few words. Later, when he became the director of the ICAR, he gave me a hard time to approve my proposal for a survey in the region of Tehran. He complained about the removal of sherds from tepes: "When you think that this professor of university or that school teacher takes his or her students to visit historical mounds, and the first thing he or she tells them is to look for sherds and remove them, you understand that this would be disastrous for our sites; in a few years you won't see any single sherd on the surface of those sites. It is why I am against your 'surface study' in your survey project", he said to me in an authoritative tone. I finally promised not to collect any sherds, and I kept my word; I had collected a few in my previous visits to the region! He was also meticulous and highly demanding when it came to fieldwork. He required regular reports, and punished those who did not submit their report in time by preventing them to do further fieldwork. His critical sense made him conscious that it was necessary to maintain high standards. Perhaps the keynote of his character was his sense of duty. This managerial behavior seemed to be of an arrogant director at times. But, we all knew that he was extremely concerned to do what he thought was right for the advancement of archaeological research in the country, and it is why he was liked

and respected by both his employees and colleagues. On the whole, Massoud Azarnoush will be remembered as a good archaeologist, an honest man, and a major figure in the history of archaeology in Iran.

With such an accumulating list of deceased personalities of Iranian archaeology in recent years, the compromising and frequent losses of Iranian archaeology positions in the West, and the vague future of archaeological fieldwork in the country, the stakes are high for the archaeology of Iran.